

The Yellow-capped Weaver *Ploceus dorsomaculatus* is not a 'nuthatch-weaver'

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Le Tisserin à cape jaune *Ploceus dorsomaculatus* n'est pas un 'tisserin-sittelle'. Dans certains ouvrages le Tisserin à cape jaune *Ploceus dorsomaculatus* est mentionné comme appartenant à la guilde des 'tisserins-sittelles', au même titre que son espèce jumelle le Tisserin de Preuss *P. preussi*. Cette note, basée sur des observations extensives au Congo-Brazzaville et au Cameroun, montre que ce n'est pas le cas. Alors que *P. preussi* se nourrit essentiellement en prospectant l'écorce des troncs et grosses branches, *P. dorsomaculatus* fouille les feuillages des grands arbres à la manière d'une grosse fauvette, et se nourrit également comme un gobemouche *Muscicapa*. Cette différence fondamentale de techniques de nourrissage explique sans doute que ces deux espèces jumelles peuvent coexister dans le même type de forêt dans une vaste région, allant du Gabon et du Cameroun jusqu'au Congo-Kinshasa.

The Yellow-capped Weaver *Ploceus dorsomaculatus* is a scarce forest resident known from a small number of localities in southern Cameroon, north-east Gabon, northern Congo-Brazzaville, southern Central African Republic (C.A.R.) and eastern Congo-Kinshasa (ex-Zaire). The distribution details given by Craig (*in* Fry & Keith 2004) contain a few errors: the only locality cited for Congo-Brazzaville is Berberati, which is in fact in C.A.R. The species was first observed in northern Congo-Brazzaville in 1994, in Odzala National Park, and reported once from Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1998). Additional localities overlooked by Craig are Lobéké in south-east Cameroon (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2000a) and Minkébé in northern Gabon (Christy 2001). Lobaye in C.A.R. (included by Craig) was rejected by Germain (1992) and the only localities acceptable for C.A.R. are Berberati (Stone 1936) and Ngotto (Christy 1995).

Preuss's Golden-backed Weaver *P. preussi* is very similar in plumage (Borrow & Demey 2001) and overlaps with *P. dorsomaculatus* from Cameroon and Gabon to eastern Congo-Kinshasa, but has a wider range, reaching Guinea in West Africa. It is generally considered to be more common, and has also a wider altitudinal range. *P. dorsomaculatus* does not penetrate montane forest *sensu stricto*: it is restricted to lowland forest in Central Africa and is not recorded with any certainty above 1,500 m in eastern Congo-Kinshasa (Chapin 1954, Prigogine 1971). The

altitude of 1,800 m mentioned by Craig apparently comes from a sight record in Kivu by Lippens & Wille (1976) and is best considered unconfirmed (especially as the feeding behaviour recorded suggests *P. preussi* rather than *P. dorsomaculatus*). *P. preussi*, on the other hand, reaches the montane zone in Cameroon north of the Sanaga: it is recorded from several massifs including Bakossi, Kupe and the Bamenda Highlands, up to c.2,000 m (it has been seen several times at Bafut-Ngamba near Bamenda at an altitude of 2,000 m, including by myself, R. J. Dowsett, M. Andrews and others in April 1997). *P. preussi* is unquestionably a nuthatch-weaver, foraging by probing the bark of trunks and larger branches (Chapin 1954, Brosset & Erard 1986, Dowsett-Lemaire 1997 and pers. obs.). The biology of *P. dorsomaculatus* remains poorly known: the voice is unknown and the nest was undescribed until recently, when N. Borrow (pers. comm.) found one near Makokou in Gabon on 21 August 2001 (the source is erroneously given as 'Borrow & Demey 2001' in Craig). Very little has been published on its feeding behaviour. Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett (1998) briefly mention that the species is distinguished from *P. preussi* not only by plumage details but also by its feeding ecology, 'exploring the foliage and not the bark for insects'. This distinction is correctly stressed in Borrow & Demey (2001). Similarly, Brosset & Erard (1986), who studied the forest avifauna of northern Gabon over a period of 20 years, noted: 'exploitant les feuillages des houppiers des arbres...vu exploitant

les essaimages de termites'—the latter sentence implying that it may also feed by flycatching.

Yet *P. dorsomaculatus* has been qualified in some handbooks (e.g. Hall & Moreau 1970, Craig *in* Fry & Keith 2004) as being part of the assemblage of 'nuthatch-weavers'. Hall & Moreau (p. 292) write of *P. dorsomaculatus*, *P. preussi* and others: 'all are alike in the way they crawl about on branches and trunks of trees searching for insects, more like nuthatches than weavers.' Craig (*in* Fry & Keith 2004) adds 'very like *P. preussi* in appearance and behaviour'. The early collectors (e.g. Bates 1909, 1911) did not as a rule record the feeding behaviour of *P. dorsomaculatus*. Chapin (1954) came across the species only once, when he collected a pair 'climbing about the larger limbs of some great trees in a clearing'. This apparently served to justify the label of 'nuthatch-weaver' in subsequent works. Yet, as the birds were collected they may not have been observed for long enough to be certain of Chapin's statement. My own observations in Congo and Cameroon concur with those of Brosset & Erard (1986) and indicate that the feeding behaviour of *P. dorsomaculatus* is radically different from that of *P. preussi*.

In Gabon (Brosset & Erard 1986), Congo and Cameroon (pers. obs.) both *P. preussi* and *P. dorsomaculatus* occur in the open canopy of semi-evergreen forest or of old secondary forest. I first came across *P. dorsomaculatus* in primary semi-evergreen forest in Odzala National Park in January 1994. A single male (with golden crown) flew into the canopy of a 50-m-tall *Piptadeniastrum africanum* (Mimosaceae) with a group of Dusky Tits *Parus funereus* and a pair of Western Black-headed Orioles *Oriolus brachyrhynchus*. This bird spent the 40 minutes it was watched searching the thin, feather-like foliage of the outer canopy. It occasionally fed upside-down, inspecting the under-surface of leaflets, but was never seen probing bark. I saw it again the same week (presumably the same bird) in the same forest, this time with a much larger mixed-species flock including Cassin's Malimbos *Malimbus cassini* and Yellow-mantled Weavers *Ploceus tricolor*. It again fed like a large warbler in the foliage of tall trees. Later that month, I watched a pair in another forest at Odzala, in a huge canopy party including *Andropadus* bulbuls, several sunbirds, malimbos, Western Black-headed Orioles etc. The pair fed in tall trees then flew to a medium-sized *Musanga*

cecropioides, searching the base of the large compound leaves for insects.

My next encounter with *P. dorsomaculatus* was in Lobéké Faunal Reserve (now a National Park) in south-east Cameroon in April 1997 (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2000a). R. J. Dowsett and I were camped on the Lobéké stream for a week, in an area of open-canopy, semi-evergreen forest—dominant tall trees being *Triplochiton scleroxylon*, *Pterygota macrocarpa*, *Ceiba pentandra* and *Terminalia superba*. A single female (with black cap) had her quarters in a number of large trees next to our tent, and a pair was seen once c. 1 km further away. The female was seen each day, occasionally feeding alone, but more frequently with other species, including the local pair of Forest Wood-hoopoes *Phoeniculus castaneiceps*, Western Black-headed Oriole, *Andropadus* bulbuls, various sunbirds, Tit-hylia *Pholidornis rushiae*, three apalis warblers *Apalis* spp., Rufous-crowned Eremomela *Eremomela badiceps*, Fernando Po Batis *Batis poensis*, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher *Erythrocerus mccallii*, and Cassin's Malimbe. The female either fed in the foliage in the usual agile manner (sometimes upside-down) or by flycatching. This was most frequently performed from the crown of an almost bare tree (in leaf-bud), in circular loops returning to the same perch or another perch in the same tree. A pair of *P. preussi* was seen several times in the vicinity and once in the same tree: the two weaver species were some distance apart as *P. preussi* fed exclusively on the bark of the trunk and large branches, and was closely associated with a pair of Red-headed Malimbe *Malimbus rubricollis*, which is also a typical bark-gleaning specialist. This close association between *P. preussi* and *M. rubricollis* has been observed elsewhere too, as in Nouabale-Ndoki (Congo) and other forest sites in Cameroon.

In all, I have watched both *P. preussi* and *P. dorsomaculatus* sufficiently closely and frequently to be confident that their feeding ecologies are very different. N. Borrow (pers. comm.), who has seen both species in Gabon on several occasions, is in complete agreement with this conclusion. Given the similarity of plumage, range and habitat, these two sibling species obviously manage to coexist by using different feeding techniques. In a limited part of their range, they may come across Brown-capped Weaver *Ploceus insignis*, a montane species with occasional vagrants or isolated populations at

medium altitudes (cf. Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 1996): thus all three were seen once in the same party at M'Passa in Gabon, *P. insignis* being a mere vagrant there (Brosset & Erard 1986). But *P. insignis* being a bark-feeding specialist like *P. preussi*, the problem of coexistence is between these two species, rather than with *P. dorsomaculatus*. At Bafut-Ngamba near Bamenda, we observed *P. preussi* and *P. insignis* feed in the same tree, in an area where extensive forest destruction had reduced available habitat to a tiny fragment. Conditions of the coexistence of *P. preussi* and *P. insignis* elsewhere in their montane range in Cameroon need investigating. In the Bakossi Mts, at least, they both appear rather rare and were not observed together (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2000b); on Mt Kupe the status of *P. insignis* (reported only twice) is uncertain and *P. preussi* is at best uncommon (Bowden 2001).

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